

LOVERS' LEAP

By Porter Emerson Browne

LEFT to herself that afternoon, she had taken a novel and had wandered over the stony ground, with its clumps of spruce and pine, its ragged ledges and huge boulders, to the deep, narrow ravine of Lovers' Leap. And there, lulled by the soft voices of the forest, she had lain upon a thick carpet of pine needles until the setting sun rested even upon the bare hills.

At length, however, the rose to her feet and picked up the book at her side. As she did so, there dropped from between its leaves a letter—or, rather, a part of a letter, for the first pages were missing. Stooping, she picked it up from its resting-place, and was about to replace it between the pages of the book when her own name caught her eye.

Unconsciously, and quite naturally, she glanced at the words that preceded and followed.

"—the way in which Barbara Ladd has treated Bob Remington, I feel that I have no great desire to meet her. Women who will torture a man for the pleasure of watching him squirm, and open his soul just to see what lies therein, as a child looks at the works of a watch, do not appeal to me. But other matters will bring me, and if it will inconvenience you to put me next to some one else at dinner, I will consent to the ordeal of sitting by her. But do not hold it forth as an inducement.

Sincerely yours,
"GORDON STEELE."

There was a postscript, but she did not read it; for she had awakened, suddenly, to the fact that the letter was intended for other eyes than hers; and a bright flush flashed quickly across the delicate whiteness of her cheek. She replaced the letter between the leaves of the book and, with flashing eyes and surging heart, turned to retrace her steps to the Lodge.

She met Steele at dinner that night. He bent his head in conventional acknowledgment of their introduction and seated himself beside her at the table. And, throughout the meal, they chatted calmly, easily, upon trivialities and commonplaces, each veiling true feelings, each burying under a flood of conversational nothings that about which each would have liked to speak.

For, as he gazed at the proudly poised head, with its wealth of golden-brown hair, the dark, honest eyes and the sensitive mouth, he somehow or other found it difficult to believe that which his cold judgment had told him was so. And in her, the temptation to tell him what she knew, and what she thought, was great—very great.

At a house-party which includes one married couple and two engaged couples, it would seem that remaining guests must, perforce, make up their minds to be much in each other's company. But somehow or other, Steele found himself baffled in every attempt to bring about a tête-à-tête with this girl who had become to him a most tantalizing enigma. For underneath the gay railery of her wit he continually caught glimpses of a tender seriousness, a keen sense of fair play and a quick sympathy. He felt confounded, puzzled, by these inconsistencies between the woman he had made up his mind to dislike and the woman he was finding so charming.

Her cleverness in keeping up a friendly attitude toward him in the presence of the others, and yet evading situations in which they would be left alone together, aroused his admiration. By the end of the third day, Steele found himself thinking of very little else except possible and impossible reasons for her evident antipathy toward him.

Then, to his surprise, on the following afternoon, when their hostess suggested for them a horseback run to the Fells, she acquiesced gracefully; and he, too, fell in at once with the plan, assuring himself that there was an excellent opportunity to study her. As they cantered down the woodland avenue, Steele reined in his huge black and rode slightly in the rear. The girl was mounted on a beautiful, clean-limbed chestnut that, with arching neck, danced daintily down the drive. With head held proudly and cheeks flushed, she sat erect upon her mount, her lithe body swaying with every movement of the animal beneath her.

At last she reined the mare to a walk and waited for him to come to her side. As he drew his horse in beside her, she turned her flushed face to him.

"I have two things to tell you," she said, frankly, even bluntly.

"I have more than two things to tell you," he returned, just as frankly.

She did not heed. "In the first place," she went on, idly rubbing the chestnut's mane with the loop of her crop, "I read a part of your letter requesting that you might not be placed next me at dinner the night you came; it was in a book that I had and I saw my name unintentionally—and read before I realized what I was doing."

She paused a moment, her eyes resting upon a squirrel that was chattering and chattering excitedly at them from the limb of a huge maple.

"And then," she continued, still stroking the mane of her mare with the leather loop, "I wish to tell you of Mr. Remington and myself."

He raised a protesting hand. "No, no," he said. "It is none of my business."

Again she did not heed him. "It was not I who broke the engagement," she said, at length, in a low voice. "It was he. But as he is more of a gentleman than are most men, he took the burden of it all upon himself and let it be known that it was I who had tired of him; while in reality," she smiled a little—a smile

Suddenly, she raised her eyes to his and drew herself up haughtily, even angrily.

"What—right have you to question me?" she demanded, coldly.

"The right of a man who wishes to know the thing that means most to him," he answered clearly.

The red flush of anger mounted her cheeks and she struck the little mare smartly with her crop. With a bound the chestnut answered, and darted quickly down the maple-lined road; and the big black, gathering himself, galloped heavily in pursuit.

They came to a fallen log. Lightly the chestnut leaped. And then again she reined in her mount; and the black, bringing its burden to her side, stopped.

The man looked down upon the flushed face, with its parted lips and glowing eyes.

"I suppose," he said, quietly, "that any apology that I might make would be utterly useless—"

"Quite," she flashed, interrupting.

"But I shall tell you, nevertheless," he continued, unheeding, "that I am far sorer for what I have done, and been, than you know; and that I think even less of myself than you think of me."

It was dark when he reached the Lodge, for he had ridden far and hard, and there were threats of a storm in the air. They were all waiting for him off the veranda—a nervous, excited group.

"Where have you been?" demanded Glendinning; and then, as Steele appeared alone from the darkness, he cried, excitedly, "Why, where's Barbara?"

The bent figure on the black horse straightened suddenly, while an awful fear clutched at his heart.

"Isn't she here?" There was infinite alarm and consternation in his voice.

"Why, no!" was the surprised response. "She went with you, and we supposed, of course, you'd return together."

"Oh, she must be lost—or killed!" cried Clare Glendinning, hysterically. "Oh, what shall we do?"

"How far along the path were you?" asked Glendinning.

"A couple of miles, I reckon," answered Steele.

"Then she must have taken the wrong fork," cried Glendinning. "Don't you remember? The path divides at an acute angle about a mile from the main road. One who didn't know the country could easily go wrong."

The big black was picking his way heavily across the uneven ground, dodging now to the right, now to the left, to avoid the trees, huge ghostly shapes that swept Steele across the face with stinging fingers—that tore at clothing and flesh.

He must have gone a mile now—perhaps more—he could not tell; for nothing passed but blackness—oppressing, terrible blackness. He was powerless to tell where he was, or where lay the ravine. He knew only that ahead, somewhere, lay the road down which she was riding to her death. He might strike this road between her and the ravine. He might strike it on the far side; if so, he could stand at its edge and by shouting from time to time warn her of her danger. But he must get there first!

Stumbling, the black crowded against a tree, and Steele's leg was caught between horse and trunk. Still, he did not check his mount, though his leg was scraped from ankle to thigh.

As his horse stopped to sniff the ground before him, the darkness bore to Steele's eager ears the sound of hoof-beats. It must be she! And in another instant she would lie crushed and bleeding at the foot of the Leap; for she was still some distance away, and the hell-trap must lie somewhere in the dense, livid blackness that separated them.

He did not hesitate. But, with a warning cry of—"Barbara! Barbara!" he plunged red spurs into the black body beneath him.

He felt the tense, spasmodic contraction of mighty muscles. Then, like a bolt from a cross-bow, the great animal sprang straight at the black wall of darkness.

The girl on the chestnut, cantering swiftly along through the night, reined her mare to its haunches as she heard the cry. For an instant nothing greeted her straining ears but silence. And then there came, almost from under the very head of her mare, a dull, crashing noise, and horrid sounds, like the snapping of dry twigs, and the blood-chilling scream of a horse. And then silence again.

She leaped from the back of the shivering chestnut and felt her way along through the darkness.

Suddenly her extended foot met no resistance. She dropped to her knees and her searching hand felt the rocky edge of the bridgeless chasm; and from beneath her came the sound of groans.

Not for an instant did she hesitate. One little foot, in its patent-leather riding-boot, swung over the rough edge of the ravine. It felt about in the utter darkness, and at last found a projecting point of rock, and from that foothold she again groped downward, and at length reached the bottom of the chasm. Then, with hands outstretched, she went slowly onward, led by the gaspings, now ever growing fainter, of the dying horse. The groanings of the man had ceased and her heart stood still.

She found him lying there beside the horse. And for a fraction of an instant she stood in helpless terror; then she dropped to her knees beside him and sought in his pockets for a match.

She found his case, and drew one from it, striking it on the rocks beside his head. The little light faintly illumined his white, set face. And then, suddenly, with a cry, she fell forward, her lips on his.

After a time—how long she did not know, she felt the body beneath her stir, and a groan came from the lips. Startled, she leaped quickly backward. In the dense darkness she could hear him moving.

"I must get there first," he muttered, and his voice, though weak, was tense with purpose. He struggled to his knees, and at length gained his feet and stood swaying unsteadily in the darkness, while she was silent, helpless, for she had thought him dead!

And then the girl awoke from her dream of despair and called to him softly.

"Her voice!" he cried, unsteadily. "She'll be killed! I must get there first!" and he shouted again, tremulously, the warning that she had heard as he and the big black had taken that desperate plunge from Lovers' Leap.

But even as he called she was before him and—

The little chestnut whinnied, long, impatiently. "Hallo-o-o-o-o-o!" came from the brink of the chasm, and the bright little eye of a lantern peered over inquisitively. The voice was Glendinning's.

"Are you there?" came the voice again, anxious, fearing, eager.

"Yes," answered Steele. "Here."

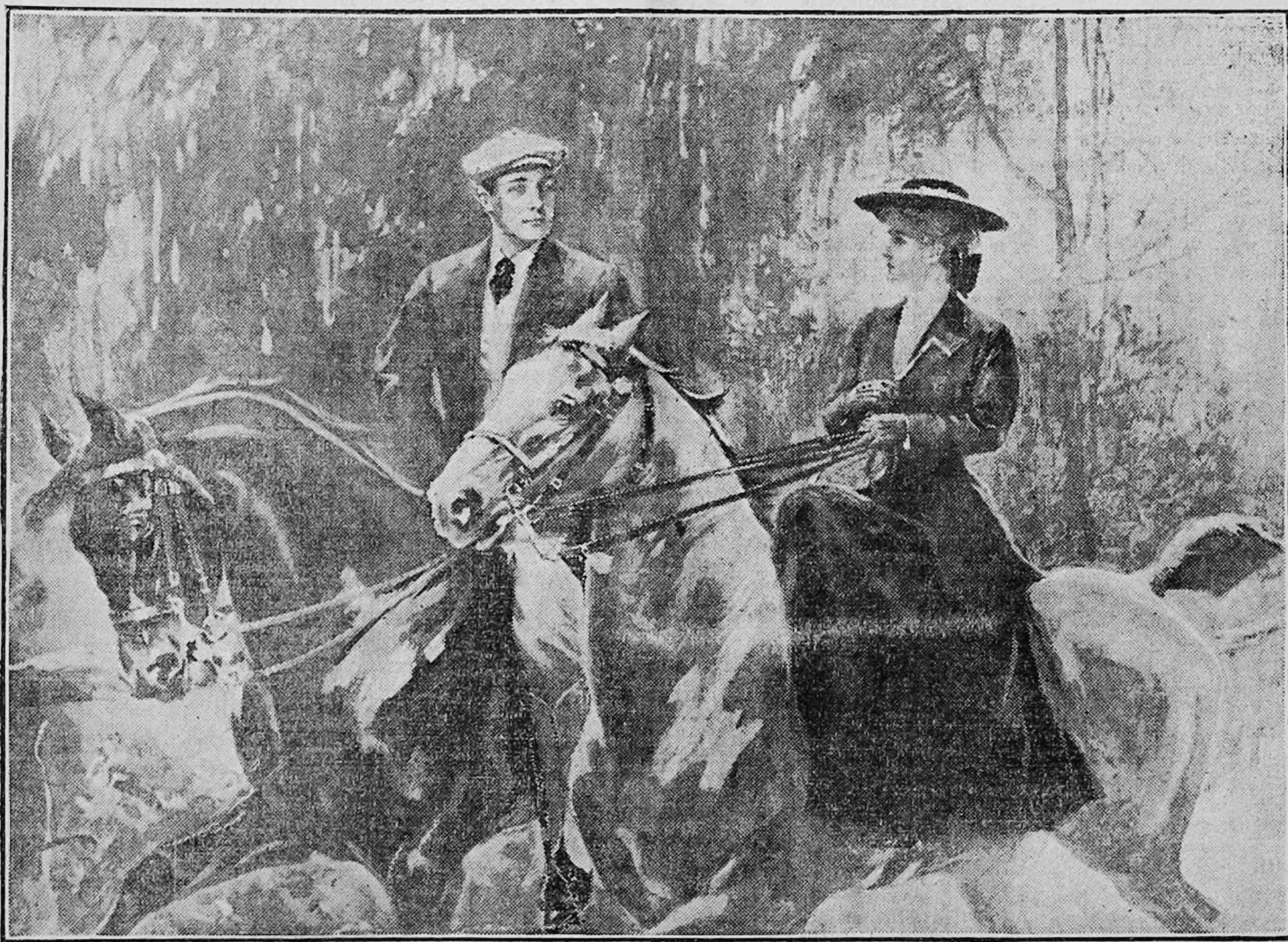
"Both of you?" came a chorus of tense queries.

"Both of us," was the reply; and the man's voice was not alone.

"Oh, then you aren't dead!" came in tones of great relief and abiding joy from the brink.

"On the contrary," was the reply, this time in the voice of the man, "I am just beginning to live."

And what then happened no one saw; for it was dark, very dark, to some; and yet brighter than God's own sun to others.



AT LAST SHE REINED THE MARE TO A WALK AND WAITED FOR HIM TO COME TO HER SIDE.

that was not at all of amusement—"it was he who had tired of me."

There was a pause. After a moment she went on:

"I suppose that it was cowardly of me to allow him to bear my ignominy, but he did it without my consent or knowledge; and for me to deny it then would only have been to resurrect it and cause more gossip, so I permitted him to sacrifice himself."

Steele was looking straight ahead, with square, set chin and softened eyes.

Her voice was colder as she continued:

"I read your letter, and, as it was not the honorable thing to do—even though it was not wilfully done—I felt that I must make reparation as far as lay in my power. It is not that I care one bit what you may think, or may have thought, but just that you may learn of another man's nobility, and possibly find for yourself a lesson in judging people when you know nothing of them."

There was another pause, broken only by slow-pounding hoofs.

At length Steele took his eyes from the dun road.

"Did you love Remington?" he asked, turning his gaze upon her. His glance was so strong, so compelling, that, almost before she realized, she replied:

"At first I thought that I did." She spoke as one from the mists of thought.

She did not reply.

"I suppose that it is, too, quite useless to ask you to forgive me," he said, tentatively; and his voice, though low and firm, held in it a note of petition.

"Do you think that you deserve forgiveness?" she asked, coldly.

He was silent for a moment.

"No," he replied, "and yes."

"What do you mean?"

"No," because of what I have been," he explained. "And 'yes,' because of what I will be, and because—" he hesitated a little, and then finished, firmly, "because I love you."

Again the red flush of anger flamed on her cheek.

"That is unworthy and contemptible," she cried, turning upon him her dark eyes filled with scorn.

"It is true," he returned, simply.

She turned toward him, her dark eyes flashing.

"I shall ride home alone," she said, coldly—so coldly that his heart told him how useless would be protest.

"I have already arranged to take the morning train back to New York," she continued. "And I shall be grateful if you will permit me to avoid you until then."

She turned her mare and rode slowly back along the leaf-strewn path, while he watched her until she was lost among the dark tree-trunks.

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NEXT WEEK: "Mixed Dates." By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY